



A Critical Time

Not too long ago, critics wielded outsized power in the wine world, sniffing, swirling and spitting out point scores that resulted in sales by the truckload. Palates moving pallets.

However, the era of the super-critic is over. The sooner the trade grasps this, the sooner we can turn the page on this era and move on to the next chapter. That's because what started out as consumer publications have slowly morphed, in many cases, into newsletters propped up by the trade.

There hasn't been so much of a defenestration of critics as much as they have been hoisted on their own petards – assuming that petard means points, because the scores critics have wielded are decidedly double-edged. During the period of the ascent of scores, they cut a wide swathe for consumers to follow through the world of wine. But soon there were so many critics wielding scores that there was a proliferation of the coveted 90-plus points. Retailers who use scores in shelf talkers, website and e-mail marketing often pick and choose for the highest score available to sell the wine, regardless of who awarded it. The result is a never-ending stream of 90-and-up-point wines pitched to in boxes across the country.

Even some of the more established publications have boosted scores across the board. Blogger W. Blake Gray crunched the numbers of Antonio Galloni's final Napa Valley report in 2013 for Robert Parker's Wine Advocate and found

the median score was 94 points. Parker himself called Bordeaux 2009 "the finest vintage" in his lifetime and handed out 98-100-point scores to 18 wines. Scores have always lacked rigor and carried a false sense of precision, but with inflation like this, the central bank of Zimbabwe looks like a model of restraint.

Just as grade inflation has penetrated the highest realms of academe, wine-score inflation has flooded the marketplace with 90s and higher. It used to be that 89 points was the dreaded kiss of death from critics, but now it appears if your wines aren't getting at least 94, you'll need more than that to move them.

How did it come to pass that wines are seemingly all above average? Point-wielding critics such as Parker have said it's because all wines are getting better. But if that's the case, then there should be an effort to maintain a curve. No, something else is fueling this race to the top.

First, if a critic gives the highest score to a wine, that score will be the one that sticks with the wine for its lifetime, first with distributors and consumers, then in the auction market if it is a collectible wine. That's good marketing for the publisher of the review.

Second, point-awarding critics have an incentive to be ecumenical in their views, not sectarian. Could a critic honestly award a high score to a high-alcohol, oaky pinot noir from California, as well as a lower-alcohol, higher-acid red Burgundy? Perhaps. But it's tough since they are utterly different styles of the

grape; one either likes the former or the latter.

But taking a stand one way or another is divisive, something critics are reluctant to do. This is because it can alienate consumer subscribers who seek to have an external validation for their tastes and/or collections. Perhaps more importantly, it could alienate trade subscribers. Further, many wine newsletters and magazines conduct events and rely on the trade to contribute wine to these events. Sometimes they benefit charities, but they are also run for profit. In either case, the cost to wineries can be significant; one producer told me he was invited to participate in two events for one publication at a cost of 20,000 euros – plus wine, large format preferred, and sending a winery representative.

At the beginning of American wine criticism, there was inspiration from Ralph Nader. Now the medium has reached a nadir. It's time to turn the page on scores as well as events with conflicts of interest. Will the trade cut subscriptions, samples and slotting fees? Probably not, as the status quo dominates. But for those who want to move beyond points, there are other ways to move those pallets now, with key restaurant placements and engaging directly with consumers foremost among them.

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